

ART WITHOUT BOUNDARIES

There are really no limits to the encouragement underprivileged children receive from this Mumbai-based NGO called Aseema.



A cheerful yellow office, tucked away in the Mumbai suburb of Bandra, is home to a range of attractive gift items, artistic stationery, beautiful coasters, Warli design bags and accessories, striking greeting cards and coffee tables. What's different about the products is that they've been made by talented children who are being nurtured and supported by a dedicated NGO called Aseema.

Established to work for the rights of underprivileged children, Aseema started an Education Centre for Underprivileged Children in 1997, believing that quality education is an undeniable right of every child. Unfortunately, in India a large number of children cannot access any form of education. Aseema tried to fill this gap starting with 18 children from the immediate locality. Today the NGO caters to almost 700 children in Mumbai and Igatpuri. Through the adoption of the Pali-Chimbai Municipal School in Bandra, Aseema ensures that formal education is made meaningful and relevant for the children.

The wonderful part of this is that the children love coming to school! Here learning is not simply about books and numbers. It is about opening up a world of possibilities for eager young minds. The academic programme is supported by a variety of co-curricular activities such as music, dance, judo, sports and art. Art in particular is a favourite of many of the children. Trained artists and teachers nurture their creativity

and the children are given complete freedom to innovate and explore.

A visit to the children's evening art class is an enlightening experience. The interaction between the art teacher, Varsha Trivedi, and the 15 students is almost magical to watch! The children paint without hesitation or fear, blithely creating a pink elephant or a blue tree with confident brush strokes. Vibrant colours fill their large white sheets and the results are remarkable pieces of children's art. Encouraged by the appreciation of their teachers, the children allow their imagination to flow freely, painting concepts like fire while others might have stuck to a flower!



It is no surprise that Aseema's products are as striking as they are. The children's art is made into designs that are placed on a wide range of products including stationery, tableware, household items and gifts. The paintings are also sold at exhibitions and art shows throughout the year. In fact, Aseema's young artists have showcased their creations alongside India's premier artists at the Hamrony Art Show for several years. Visitors to Aseema's office do not buy the NGOs products out of sympathy or simply for charity. They buy them because they are works of art by some remarkable children.



Varsha joined Aseema around ten years back at the request of the founder, Dilbur Parakh initially intending to hold just a few sessions with the children. "I found the level of creativity so high that I decided to take regular classes," she says. Over the years the children haven't disappointed her, their enthusiasm to learn never fails to amaze her. "When I ask these kids to take their paintings home, they say 'no' because their homes have no walls, and they are afraid their siblings might tear up their work! They prefer to leave them in the art class," she reveals.

Among the students is Rakesh, a standard six student of Pali-Chimbai Municipal School. His mother is a helper at Aseema, while his father has been laid off his job because of an accident in which he lost one of his legs. Watching him paint a tree, and work on colours and backgrounds based on gentle suggestions from Varsha is a real treat! His teacher watches with pride. "There are so many children like him," she says. "We have a standard eight student called Sunita Gaddam. You just have to give her a hint of what you want and she comes out with an ocean!"

Witnessing their art being appreciated and bought gives the children a great sense of pride. The money that is collected from the sale of the products is distributed equally among all the children, and deposited in their bank accounts. The initiative also brings Aseema some much needed revenue for healthcare and quality education for the children, allowing them to serve nutritious meals, and buy uniforms and books. Though the income from this initiative is still small, Aseema aims to become self sufficient through the sale of its products.

Like with any NGO, sufficient funds are always lacking, and Aseema is open to financial help, especially as it is on the threshold of many new development. It proposes to set up Pre-Primary and Secondary sections at the Santacruz (West) Municipal School. An Education Centre for Tribal Children is being planned in Igatpuri, where Aseema already runs and aanganwadi.

Children everywhere deserve a chance not only to basic education, but also at unleashing their creativity. Aseema shows that there are really no limits to what they can achieve with the right opportunities.



